

December 25, 2020

“Sonrise”

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pure and acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our heavenly Father, our Rock and our Salvation. Amen. Well as we've gone through the Advent Season, we've been looking at prophecies; prophecies spoken of in the old days. But of course, we live in the New Testament, in new days and today that is what we see in our gospel reading. Zechariah really understood this concept of a new day. In the setting of our gospel, John the Baptist had just been born. Now remember, this was really a momentous occasion. Nine months and eight days prior to this, Zechariah was serving as the priest for the day. He was in the Holy Place offering burnt incense before the Lord at the altar of incense, as he also offered up his prayers.

Now just a reminder, again about what this means. Our sanctuary here at Zion is designed in a Tabernacle, or Temple design; and so, the Holy Place is the area where everyone is sitting. And for those of you who are here, you can see the 10 pillars, 5 on each side, that that represents the 10 lampstands that were burning day and night in the holy place; the place where only the priests could go. At the front, right about where our Baptismal Font stands, or, probably more like right here, was the Altar of Incense. This is where each day the priest would come and burn incense and offered their prayers to the Lord. As the incense rose, their prayers rose to God. Now of course, we have this big arch here and that would have been the curtain of separation that separates the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. And what was in the Most Holy Place? The light where our Altar is would have been the Ark of the Covenant and our altar is almost the exact same size as that Ark of the Covenant. And so, as the priest would be here praying and burning incense, at that time, that incense would rise up, go over the curtain of separation, and it would then come down as if coming before God. And on the top of the Ark of the Covenant was the Mercy Seat; so that the incense, the prayers were coming before God for His mercy.

Now this was a phenomenally big thing for the priest, it was a very high privilege. Understand that at the time of Zechariah, there was approximately 20,000 priests in Jerusalem and so he was one out of 20,000, chosen by lot to

serve. Most priests never had that opportunity. And so, when he is there at that Altar of Incense, one curtain away from the Ark of the Covenant, from that which symbolized God right there. Again, remember when the temple was originally built; that's where the shekinah glory, the cloud of God, came down and rested was in that place in the temple. It is there that Zechariah is burning incense, offering prayer, and Gabriel the Angel comes to him.

And then we read that he, Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. So, it's no surprise that we again here in Angel in this case Gabriel saying very first thing, 'do not be afraid.' But now listen carefully to the next five words; "your prayer has been heard." I say listen carefully because if you look at that, the word prayer is singular. So, what was he praying about? Well, consider the answer to the prayer that has been heard. "You're going to have a son and you will name him John." Now Zechariah comes back with, "how shall I know this because I'm an old man and my wife is beyond the years of bearing children?" And yet, there is a problem. He is a priest. He knows his scripture, he knows that the lineage for the Messiah, began with Abraham. It began with an announcement to Abraham that he, though he was 90 years old would be a father. I take that back; Abraham was almost 100. Sarah his wife was 90. And so, we have almost identical situations; it's just not as bad.

Zechariah was not approaching 100, and Elizabeth was not anything close to ninety. So, Gabriel tells him that since he doubted, he would be mute, and unable to talk. So, nine months, eight days later, John has been born. On that eighth day, he is brought to be circumcised and named. But since Zechariah was mute and couldn't speak, Elizabeth said his name will be John. And Zechariah's friends, the priests were well no, no, no, he must have the name of his father, we must continue this lineage. We must call him Zechariah. They spoke to Zechariah, they motion to him and they say you must, you know write down what his name is supposed to be. As he took out piece of papyrus or whatever to write on and he began to write he wrote and spoke; his name is John.

And filled with The Holy Spirit we read, he prophesied. Again, remember, we oftentimes have a false image or idea of what prophecy is. Prophecy is proclaiming God's Word. Since God knows future, it can take the form of proclaiming what will happen in the future. He begins to prophecy,

and the first step of his prophecy is to praise God. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited;” and again, listen very carefully, “for He has redeemed His people.” Why did I say listen carefully? Because it is written in the past tense. Redeemed. He did not say, blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited His people so that He can redeem them. No! He has redeemed them. You see, Zechariah learned a lesson in those nine months and eight days. If God speaks, it will be done. And throughout the Old Testament, it speaks of God sending His Messiah to redeem His people. That Messiah is born, what Zechariah is saying is, it is as good as done folks! It is as good as done. God has spoken, you have been redeemed. It is going to happen!

But He does not stop there. He says, He's raised up a horn of Salvation. A horn was the sign of strength or victory. It is what you did when you won, you sounded the horn. So, he is proclaiming it's already done! We have won! He goes back to prophecy now, old prophecy. “For us in the House of His servant, David; fulfillment of what was said that it would be through the lineage of David, His throne would be established forever. He has remembered His covenant. That is going all the way back to Abraham; the covenant that was made with him through his promised son Isaac. And then he looks at his baby boy John; and he says, “and you child will be called prophet of the Most High. And you will go before Him to prepare His (listen) ways. Again, so much is found in a single word. It's not His way; it's His ways, the ways of the Messiah. He was not coming to prepare this road for Him. He is coming to prepare the ways for Him. The ways that we are to live, the ways that have come. Because this is a radical change. It is a radical change from a Law oriented lifestyle that is ruled by you shall and you shall not; to a gospel way that says He has done all and then we respond with thanks and praise and love. Love of God that He would sacrifice His Son for us. Love for each other and it is not that it's commanded; we want to do this for Him. Just as we want to buy Christmas presents for those we love; we want the best for those who we love. We want the best for our God.

John is coming to prepare the ways of the Lord, of total radical shift in lifestyle and to give knowledge. This was a job of the priest, to preserve knowledge and give knowledge to the people. But what knowledge? To give knowledge of Salvation to His people in the forgiveness of sins. This is to be the focal point of John the Baptist's preaching. To give the people the

knowledge of forgiveness of sins. It is not found in the sacrifices. It is going to be found in a manger, in the Savior.

Why? Why would God do this? We do not deserve it! Zechariah continues, “because of the tender mercies of our God. Please remember what mercy means. To not get what you deserve. This gives us an image of God the Father with a wayward child. And the wayward child says to the Father, ‘I’m so sorry, I messed up.’ Does the Father give him a beating; which is what he deserves, or a hug? This is what tender mercy is. It is God the Father saying, “Come to me. Come to come to me my repentant people, who see their sin. I’ve got the answer, let me hug you. You are not going to get the internal spanking. I forgive you.” Those of you who are parents you know this. You know that when the child is wrong, and you see it in their eyes, and their heart that they are sorry; and they say, ‘I’m sorry dad, I’m sorry mom.’

This is what Zechariah is telling us. And then he goes to Malachi and goes back to the prophecy. Whereby the Sunrise shall visit us from on high.” Tell me how does a Sunrise visit us from on high? It cannot unless we misspell it and put Sun instead of Son. You see, Jesus is the Son of God who will rise from the dead. He truly is the beginning of a New Day, the beginning of a new life. Eternal life through Him, the promised Messiah. It is a life of peace that passes all human understanding. And it is the light since He is the Light of the world. It is the light of Christmas, the “Son rise,” shall we say. Zechariah ends it with the sunrise to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. Please remember, go back a little bit to Mary. Remember? The Almighty will overshadow you. It’s where light is not it’s limiting when you don’t have light. But when God overshadows you with His light, all the limitations are gone the light is there. We sit in the shadow of death, we sit in the darkness of sin, but God brings us light, He overshadows us. This is the miracle of Salvation, it is the “Son rise,” that light of Salvation coming to us, and it is a miracle. A miracle of Emmanuel, God with us!